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*Sukhitashvili Eliso,
PhD student in English Philology,
the Faculty of Humanities
Tbilisi State University,*

THE GAME OF ROLES IN HAROLD PINTER'S THE COLLECTION AND THE LOVER

Abstract. In *The Collection* and *The Lover* Pinter depicts a world in which games give meaning to the characters' lives. The characters combine two natures in themselves, and the truth they speak is in a state of flux like Heraclitus' river, and it returns as reflected in the consciousness of the characters. Scenes depicted in one play are reflected in another play. There is no birth in the plays, and the characters are as infertile as the land is barren in Eliot's poem.

Keywords: Game, Roles, *The Collection*, *The Lover*.

Game, as a necessary attribute in the lives of characters, plays a large role in Pinter's plays. *The Collection* (1961) and *The Lover* (1962) are the plays in which the role of a game is brought to the fore. Imagination can be considered as one of the main tools of the game. The course of the play determines what role each character, and at the same time the player, is assigned.

The Collection

The game of roles, earlier than Pinter, can be found in the play *The Rules of the Game* (English translation) written in 1918 by the Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello. The title of the play means *The Game of Roles* in Italian, and perhaps this second version carries a deeper meaning in the play, because it is the roles of Leone and Guido that decide who will participate in a duel. Pirandello, considered a forerunner of Beckett and Pinter, in this play describes a situation that echoes themes expressed in Pinter's plays: games are also played between couples here.

The Collection begins with a ringing of a telephone and the reader (or the spectator) enters the first part of Fraytag's pyramid – exposition, and begins the most important game that takes place throughout the play and which can be called, as Pirandello called his play, "the game of roles", which

combines various games in itself according to which person plays which role. The rules of the game are simple: two players (Harry and James) try to find out the truth and the other two (Bill and Stella) try to keep this truth from being revealed (although, later, these rules are mixed and Harry himself changes the "truth" told by Stella in the last part).

The first game is played by Bill and Stella in the role of an "unfaithful" spouse. Readers (spectators) play this game along with the characters. Even the characters, including Bill and Stella, do not know how the game will play out. The situation is complicated by the fact that Bill and Stella give opposite answers. Along with this, James and Harry also change in their own way what Bill and Stella said. It can be said that the words of Bill and Stella are reflected in the consciousness of Harry and James, and this reflected story reaches the reader (spectator) in a different form. Consequently, the audience also has to guess who among these four characters is telling the truth.

Wagner names five games in the play: "In the first game, the players are Stella and James. In the second game, the players are Harry and Bill. In the third game, the players are Bill and James. In the fourth game, the players are Harry and Stella, and in the

fifth game, the players are Harry, Bill, and James” [15, 125]. However, it would probably be better if we changed this Wagner sequence a bit. As the first game, Wagner considers avoiding communication between Stella and James and, as an example, brings the episode when James is not telling Stella what he is going to do or whether he will come home that night or not. However, later it turns out that Stella told her husband about the incident with Bill in Leeds in detail, which does not necessarily suggest that the husband and wife do not communicate with each other. Moreover, Stella may seem too honest towards her husband. We get this information from James, and that’s why the question arises here, is James telling the truth? Did Stella really tell him this story? But in the conversation of James and Bill this story is partly true in the play context.

The second game is played by Bill and James when James comes to visit Bill. This episode shows James’ homosexual relationship with Bill and vice versa. It can be said that now James and Bill are presented as a couple. As if now this couple is in the role of an “unfaithful spouse.” Bill says to James: “You must come again when the weather is better,” [12, 57] and in a conversation with Stella, James says about Bill: “I found him quite charming” [12, 66]. “He is a very cultivated bloke, your bloke, quite a considerable intelligence at work there” [12, 67].

The participants of the third “game” are Stella and Harry. Harry goes to visit Stella. What is important about this visit is the fact that Harry appears here as a heterosexual. He behaves as if he wants to charm Stella with something: “Oh, what a beautiful kitten, what a really beautiful kitten. ... Come here kitty, kitty” [12, 72]. Come here kitty, kitty seems to be ambiguous and is probably addressing Stella herself as well.

In the next stage, James and Bill continue to play with knives. It’s as if Bill is presented here as an abuser of James’s wife, and James as a husband who defends his wife’s dignity. This episode is similar to Edward Albee’s *The Zoo Story*, in which Peter and Jerry fight with knives in the park. Bill and James, we

can assume, are secretly fighting for Stella – whose will be Stella in the end. This episode also reminds us of the story of Guido and Leone’s duel in Pirandello’s play. In this play, one might say, Guido (lover) and husband (Leone) “fight” for Silia in a duel at the end of the play, but Leone appears here as Marquis Miglioriti. Although Marquis actually fights in the duel, it is also Leone’s fight against Silia’s lover. James throws a knife at Bill’s face, and Bill grabs it by the hand and cuts his hand, echoing a line mentioned earlier in the play: BILL. “She scratched a little, did she? Where? [Holds up hand] On the hand? No scar. No scar anywhere. Absolutely unscarred” [12, 55–56]. Bill didn’t have a scar before, but now he does. Bernard Dukore notes that “In Pinter’s play, scenes reflect other scenes” [3, 82] and cites this very episode as an example. Dukore further supports his opinion by the fact that there is not only one homosexual and heterosexual couple in the play, but two: Bill and James, Bill and Harry, Bill and Stella, James and Stella [3, 82]. We should add one more couple: Harry and Stella, about whom we have already talked about above. I would say that the scenes in Pinter’s play, in addition to reflecting other scenes, also reflect scenes in other plays. The “scar” episode, if we think deeper, reminds us of the relationship between Max (Richard) and Sarah in Pinter’s “*The Lover*”, when Sarah scratches Max’s hand [11, 19–20] and therefore leaves a scar in the form of a scratch. Maybe it’s Bill and Stella who appear in *The Lover* in the form of Sarah and Max playing the role of lovers? Maybe Sarah and Max are in Leeds? Maybe Bill and Stella invented the story of their relationship in Leeds in order to give some meaning to their lives (like Sarah and Richard invented their lovers)? Maybe James himself, in the form of Bill, had a relationship with Stella in Leeds, and now he attributes this story to someone else? These are the questions that an observant reader may have when reading these two plays. It is this uncertainty that drives the play.

The final game in the play is not played by Harry, Bill and James, as Wagner points out, but Harry, and

the play reaches the climax of Fraytag's pyramid. Harry twists Stella's claim that James made up the story of the meeting in Leeds, and tells James and Bill that Stella fabricated everything, and surprisingly, both, James and Bill confirm it. It's as if all the characters in the play want this story not to be true, and that's why they confirm it.

In this play, as well as in *The Lover* written a year later, couples need to invent a partner in order to give some meaning to life. Life with existing partners is not perfect. The characters are not happy with the life they live and that's why they invent. Whether James invented this story, Stella or it actually happened is unclear, but the fact is that the main plot of the whole play is based on it, and the characters enjoy the process of finding it out. They care less about the truth itself. If we say that the scenes in Pinter's play reflect the scenes of other plays, then it is logical to think that the scene of the invention of the lover depicted in *The Lover* was depicted in *The Collection* before. Based on this, we can conclude that the characters of *The Collection* invented the story that happened in Leeds. The ambiguity of the truth at the end of the play should indicate that the same games that have been going on throughout the play may spin again on a new circuit.

According to Wagner, as I mentioned above, Bill, Harry and James are involved in the last, fifth game. "The men fight for possession of the woman" [15, 130]. I wouldn't say that though. Bill and James don't know what game Harry is playing as he twists what Stella says to his advantage. To be more exact, he attributes to Stella what she did not say. James and Bill seem to be caught in this trap, or they just want to be caught. Also, all three men can't play to get Stella, because if the story of Leeds is fictional, then Stella is James', not Harry's or Bill's. It turns out that if Harry wants the Leeds story not to be true, then his interest is Bill, not Stella.

Two mutually exclusive things are not mutually exclusive in Pinter's play. Stella can be a devoted wife as well as a lover, just like Sarah of *The lover*. This conclusion drawn from *The Collection* reflects the

idea expressed in *The Lover*. That is, it can be said that, we once again have the story depicted in *The Collection*, which is also repeated in *The Lover* and the opinion expressed above that the scenes of one play in Pinter's plays reflect the scenes of another play is justified. *The Collection* reminds us of Heraclitus' doctrine of flux and the unity opposites: Heraclitus, I believe, says that all things pass and nothing stays, and comparing existing things to the flow of a river, he says you could not step twice into the same river [7, 3.1]. In the play, the situation is constantly changing, and the story of the meeting in Leeds was sometimes invented by James and sometimes by Stella. Sometimes they met each other and sometimes they didn't. Stella is sometimes faithful to her husband and sometimes unfaithful. She unites two opposites, as man unites, in the words of Heraclitus, life and death, sleep and waking, youth and old age [7, 3.2]. However, these two opposites cannot exist at the same time, either one must exist at a given moment of time, or the other. We find a similar opinion in Pirandello's play. Leone says that „reality is a ceaseless flow of perpetual newness" [13, 128]. The truth heard from the characters is changeable.

The Lover

In *The Lover*, "the game of roles" occurs early on when the couple changes their roles. Richard asks Sarah if her lover is coming today, and when he finds out that he is coming, he leaves the house. The action seems to take a comic turn when it turns out that Richard himself returns home in the role of Sarah's lover. The situation in Luigi Pirandello's *The Rules of the Game* (*The Game of Roles*) is similar, but reversed. In this play by the Italian playwright, the husband, not the lover, comes home to his wife for half an hour every day. Silia spends time with her lover – Guido. In *The Lover* in the conversation between Sarah and Richard it becomes clear that not only Sarah, but also Richard has a lover. Richard and Sarah are playing the game of unfaithful partners. The characters thus try to be in such a role that will allow them to escape from everyday life and they will

temporarily find themselves “into an erotic world” [1, 33].

In Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (which was written in the same year as Pinter’s *The Lover*), the characters live with an imaginary child who gives their lives meaning. Even in *The Lover*, the relationship between Sarah and Richard seems to exist through their imaginary lovers. It turns out that imagination plays one of the main roles in these authors’ plays. The climax in the play begins with the arrival of milkman John. It is an irony as if another lover really came to Sarah. Then the doorbell rings again. Max (Richard) enters. Richard and Sarah, as is clear from the play, refer to each other by different names, which probably indicates that they play the roles of different lovers:

MAX. Come here, Dolores [11, 22].

MAX. It’s teatime, Mary [11, 23].

Sarah also receives various guests, “strangers, total strangers” [11, 37]. We can also think that milkman John is one of Richard’s roles as Sarah’s lover. Sarah, as she says herself, sometimes receives other guests and Richard may be in this role now. In this climactic moment, Richard sometimes plays the role of the lover, sometimes the abuser, and sometimes the savior of Sarah, the park owner, who frees Sarah from a gentleman [11, 21]. This moment is interesting in that it reminds us of Edward Albee’s *The Zoo Story* (1958), in which Peter kills Jerry in the park. In the case of Sarah and the park owner, Sarah survives the attacker. Judging from the text of the play, this assailant (although this assailant must have been Richard himself) tried to rape Sarah. In Pirandello’s *The Game of Roles* this episode is connected with the entry of drunken men into Silia’s apartment, who will mistakenly come to Silia instead of the prostitute Pepita. The men abuse Silia. With this episode, on the one hand, the author probably wanted to say that Silia (at least in her thoughts) is a prostitute like Pepita.

In the scene of his final appearance as a lover, Richard takes out a drum and starts playing. In Pinter’s plays, the drum serves a role of important

changes. In *The Birthday Party* the breaking of Stanley’s drum and glasses indicates the destruction of Stanley as a person, and in *The Lover* Richard’s (Max’s) drumming marks the end of Richard’s role as a lover, as well as Sarah’s. In *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* characters don’t play the drum, but after the bells ring, the characters begin to release themselves from the imagination of a child. Richard, unlike Sarah, no longer wants to be in the role of a lover, and with this last visit he ends his relationship with his “whore.” Silia also no longer wants her husband to visit her at home every day, because he prevents her from gaining absolute freedom. She uses the story of her abuse by drunken men to her advantage and makes Leone (husband) challenge her abuser Marquis Miglioriti to a duel as she wants her husband to be killed. In Pirandello’s play, the female representative can no longer stand the presence of her husband. Her conscience does not bother her when she is with her lover. In *The Lover* it is the male representative (Richard) who can no longer bear the role of a lover in his home. After that, the so-called “falling action” starts in the play and Richard plays his last game. He forbids Sarah to bring her lover at home, but he does not mind if she takes her lover somewhere else [11, 35]. Sarah is not allowed to bring her lover at home, but she can take him anywhere else. In the play, the places (a ditch, a rubbish dump, a stagnant pond) to which Richard allows Sarah to take her lover have a deep meaning. He allows her to take her lover to terrible places, which reminds us of Eliot’s unfinished play *Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama*, in which Sweeney invites Doris on a crocodile isle. He describes the island shockingly. He says that on this island, he will make a stew of Doris and like a cannibal he will eat her [6, 118]. Maybe Sarah’s taking her lover into a ditch or a stagnant pond indicates her lover’s death? Sweeney then tells the story of a murder of a girl, whom the killer kept in lysol in the bathroom [6, 122], which logically reminds us of William Faulkner’s story *A Rose for Emily*, in which Emily keeps the corpse of

her lover, Homer Barron, in her bed. Maybe it's time for Sarah to "kill" her lover (imaginary lover) of the afternoon and end their lives as lovers? In Eliot's play after the killer murders the girl:

"He didn't know if he was alive and the girl was dead

He didn't know if the girl was alive and he was dead"

He didn't know if they both were alive or both were dead [6, 123]. As we can see, after the murder, "the line between death and life, real and unreal, life and nightmare, mundane and heavenly worlds is blurring" [10, 244]. In Pinter's play, maybe the "death" of a lover erases the line between life and a nightmare. Maybe that lover is what gives meaning to Richard and Sarah's life. And the "death" of a lover can make their life a real nightmare. Like the story told by Sweeney, Richard "kills" a girl – his lover.

At the end of the play, Richard still calls Sarah a whore. One gets the impression that Richard can't quite get out of the role of a lover. Two personalities are realized in this one person, one as a husband and the other as a lover, and maybe the author wanted to say that these two things cannot exist independently of each other. Sarah and Richard can both be spouses and lovers. As Walter Kerr notes, 'personality is not something given; it is fluid' [9, 32]. The same can be said about Stella, as mentioned above. Pirandello's Silia is exactly like this: she has both, a husband and a lover.

Richard, in the role of a husband, cannot treat his wife as he would his lover, and it can be said that their game shows a sadomasochistic attitude, which changes at the end of the play. There is also a sadomasochistic attitude between husband and wife in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* In the case of Sarah and Richard, their sadomasochism does not go beyond the limits and does not go into an overly painful form. The couple respects their marital relationship and both are aware of the difference between a marital relationship and a passionate lover's relationship. They don't want to mix these two things and that's why they have

afternoons kept for lovers and evenings for marital relations. But, on the one hand, as we mentioned above, in the end, Richard can no longer bear to cheat his wife in the afternoon, and on the other hand, it can be the other way around, he doesn't want such a relationship with his wife only in the afternoon and wants to continue the same in the evening, as Hinchliffe points out [8, 124]. Richard breaks the rules of the afternoon game and starts a new game that will continue in the evening. Dutta confirms this fact and notes that the last phrase of the play "You lovely whore" suggests that the game resumes again, it never ends" [4, 231]. Thomas Adler notes that the couple's game fluctuates because Richard cannot "transform the thin, "bony" woman that Sarah in reality is into the whore of his dreams – a "voluminous great uddered feminine bullock" [2, 383]. This may be one of the reasons why they stop their game. However, it is probably more logical to think that this happens because of the continuation of the relationship in the evening. In Pirandello's *The Rules of the Game* (*The Game of Roles*), Silia's plan to kill her husband fails. Her lover Guido (as Silia's real owner, who spends much more time with her than Leone) has to duel and dies. Leone says to Guido: "You must play your part, just as I am playing mine. It's all in the game" [13, 137]. Unlike Sarah and Richard, Silia and Guido cannot continue this relationship. For Silia, too, "the line between death and life, real and unreal, life and nightmare is blurring."

The children that Richard mentions but do not appear in the play are probably only imaginary and remind us of the story told in the first act of Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*, added later in 2004, about the lives of Peter and Ann, whose children, if we think logically, are imaginary like the imaginary child of the characters – Martha and George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* If we look closely, the characters in these early plays of both Pinter and Albee are infertile. Humans are like the land in Eliot's *The Waste Land* – infertile, unable to give birth to new

life. "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow out of this stony rubbish?" [5, 10] – writes Eliot. The Sibyl of Cumae mentioned in the epigraph is also one of the examples of infertility and death.

We can conclude that in *The Collection*, like in Pinter's predecessor Pirandello's play, the course of the play and the main plot are built on the visit of someone else who brings changes (we can also call them, problems) to the lives of the characters.

The truth (in *The Collection*) is not some particular kind of reality, but the games between the characters allow this truth to be changed, and just as, according to Heraclitus, we cannot step into the same river twice, we cannot learn the same truth from the characters.

The games between the couples allow us to imply that they (Harry, Bill, James) are not only heterosexuals but also homosexuals. Sarah and Richard can be devoted spouses and lovers at the same time.

Scenes in *The Collection*, in addition to reflecting other scenes, reflect scenes from other plays. The uncertainty of the truth at the end of the play should indicate that the same game(s) that have been going on throughout the play can be played again in a new circle.

In *The Lover*, a game is presented as a life-giving thing for the couple. It gives meaning to their lives. And the "murder" of an imaginary lover makes life as nightmarish as Sweeney describes it to Doris on

a crocodile isle. In both of these Pinter's plays, as in Edward Albee's plays, imagination plays a large role. It gives meaning to the lives of the characters. It has such a large role that even the relationship between husband and wife is colorless without an imaginary lover, and that is why the two (husband-wife relationship and a lover) somehow unite at the end of the play, as opposed to the beginning of the play, and the game begins again in a new form.

A drum plays a pivotal role in Pinter's plays. The smashing of Stanley's drum and glasses in *The Birthday Party* suggests the destruction of Stanley as a person, and in *The Lover* playing the drum by Richard's marks the end of Richard's role as lover, as well as Sarah's. Not playing the drum, but the ringing of the bells in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by Albee suggests a release from an imaginary child.

Birth never happens in Pinter's and Albee's early plays (*The Zoo Story*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *The Collection*, *The Lover*), the characters are infertile. A child, new life, exists only in the imagination.

In *The Lover*, a sadomasochistic attitude can be seen between the husband and wife, similar to the characters in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

There are no "invaders" and "outsiders" in the games. The people who come there are connected to the past of the characters.

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